

Moving at Last on Arms Control

Reagan's Proposal Deserves Attention Here and in Moscow

By ALBERT GORE JR.

The President's speech at Eureka College has, as he hoped it would, changed the nature of America's debate over arms control. Regardless of the merits of his proposal, the fact that he has now called for a resumption of talks with the Soviet Union and has outlined our official negotiating position alters the terms of the discussion from this point forward.

Advocates of a nuclear freeze and proponents of alternative plans for strategic arms control must reassess the roles that they now wish to play as the debate continues, taking comfort in the knowledge that they have forced the President to change his timetable and have helped persuade him to adopt a meaningful as opposed to a cosmetic approach to the negotiations.

The proposal itself raises many questions. It looks like a bid for numerical parity between U.S. and Soviet ballistic-missile forces at sharply reduced numbers. In the first phase of his proposal, the President calls for sharp reductions to a level where both sides have equal numbers of warheads on an equal number of ballistic missiles, with more or less equal numbers of those warheads deployed on land. Specifically, there would be 5,000 warheads for each side, 850 ballistic missiles, both land- and sea-based, with not more than 2,500 warheads to be based on land.

In the second phase of his proposal, the President calls for a ceiling on the overall throw weight of the ballistic missiles of both sides, at a number lower than the figure for current U.S. forces.

According to the President, these reductions would be made with the objective of achieving "stability through significant reductions in the most destabilizing nuclear systems, ballistic missiles and especially intercontinental ballistic missiles."

This statement is in line with the growing consensus in our country that the arms-control process can and should be used vigorously to help resolve strategic nuclear problems that will otherwise force both sides to deploy ever-greater numbers of weapons in a search for safety.

However, the problem is that not all reductions are benign, and not all forms of parity lead to stability. Stability is not something inherent in the strategic forces of either country in isolation—it is instead dependent on the relationship between the two forces, and on how these forces tend to

influence decision-making when they are played off against each other.

To assess the President's program, it is essential to know precisely how the forces of each side would evolve through the two phases of his proposal.

There are many paths that either side could take. But it is quite possible to realign the forces of both countries in conformity with the President's proposal, in a way that would lead not to greater stability but to less stability.

Both sides could have numerical parity—indeed, they could be almost symmetrical—and both sides could exist in smaller numbers. Yet each side might, depending on the weapons it chose to keep, still be in a position to launch a first strike against the other's ICBMs (a "counterforce" attack) while retaining a substantial force in reserve. At the conclusion of the exchange, the attacking side would enjoy a substantial numerical advantage over the victim. In other words, the President's formula can be worked out in a way that leads to the worst of all possible arrangements: mutually vulnerable forces, poised always on a hair-trigger alert.

This is obviously an undesirable outcome, and presumably one that both the United States and the Soviet Union will seek to avoid as both nations negotiate from their opening positions. It can certainly be avoided if both nations wish to avoid it.

The key to a successful agreement in the age of parity is the elimination of even the theoretical possibility of a strategic first strike by either side. There are other ways, starting from premises rather like those of the President, to achieve this objective. One such proposal, which I favor, calls for synchronized reductions beginning with the dismantling of counterforce weapons on both sides.

This proposal would seek to ensure that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union would ever be in a position to make the arithmetic of a first strike work. Although either side could attack the other's ICBMs, the attacker would have to use up his entire ICBM inventory and a large proportion of his submarine-based missiles to do the job.

Given the fact that we now have a presidential position on arms control, where do we go from here? As a first priority, we have to ask ourselves how relevant to the issue and how helpful to the country are the pro-

posals that have been advanced in Congress and in the public to date.

The principal value of a freeze proposal was as a means for showing the President the depth of the public's belief that arms control has been held in abeyance too long, and that it needs to move rapidly.

Having clearly fulfilled this function, the freeze movement would be wise to change its agenda. U.S. policy is not going to adopt a freeze proposal while the present Administration is in office. To continue to advocate this course of action means that the movement will be sidelined.

Another important idea now in the public arena is the Democratic proposal that the shelved SALT II agreement be revived and ratified. The principal value of this suggestion is that it underscores a fact that this Administration seems to have learned since taking office—but that it hasn't acknowledged: There was value in the arms-control process and in the 1979 SALT II agreement. Its constraints were not merely cosmetic, but were useful to the national security.

The fact is that the President's position is relatively closer to the never-ratified SALT II than to more radical arms-control concepts pushed by others in the Administration. But the Administration would nevertheless feel forced to go to the political "battle stations" to head off any formal effort in Congress to bring SALT II into force. So that effort, at this stage, could serve as a distraction from the negotiations with the Soviet Union.

We in Congress would do better to take a less confrontational route. A resolution, widely supported, to the effect that Congress desires to be consulted in advance by the President, should he decide to break with current policy of informal observation of major elements of the SALT agreements, would be a better approach.

The most important thing, however, is that the President has now chosen to pursue a meaningful arms-control agreement with the Soviet Union. With arms control off dead center, the way may now open up for discussion of other areas of U.S.-Soviet friction. The President's speech contains much on these issues that deserves our support, and careful attention in Moscow.

Rep. Albert Gore Jr. (D-Tenn.) is a member of the House Select Committee on Intelligence.

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* Still? June '83?

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